

Travel Award Write-Up

Conducting Research in Western China



With the support of the Royal Holloway Travel Award I spent one month in Western China meeting researchers and conducting primary research for my MSc dissertation. In a region where government investment and growing private enterprise is driving lightning fast rates of economic growth, I wanted to find out what are the impacts of development on workers adapting to a changing labour market and how the ethnicity of Han Chinese (the ethnic majority in China) and ethnic minorities in the region were differentially influencing their working opportunities.

On flying into Lanzhou, Gansu province, you are greeted with the vast, dry Loess Plateau and it's hard to comprehend how an area this sparse can support a growing city of 2.5 million people. On arriving in the city and seeing the Yellow river this questions is quickly answered for you (yellow from the eroded silt of the surrounding plateau).



On the first evening I was treated to a delicious range of Hunan cuisine (a region in China famous for its spicy food) by the friendly students and teachers of the department of Geography at Lanzhou University.

After a day or two getting over the tiredness of the journey, I met again with professors from the department to get advice on the research I had proposed. Their suggestions and contacts in the field were to prove invaluable in getting a foothold in a new city. Taking their advice and feedback on board [and my newly printed tri-lingual questionnaires!] I travelled to the fieldwork destination curious to find out how people would take me. My first task was to find a research assistant who could assist in translating my Mandarin for those less fluent in the language, and this was where the

contact from Lanzhou really helped. I was put in touch with a masters' student from a local university who agreed to assist me complete the research over the next three weeks.

To pilot the questionnaire, we visited a public park to the south of the city looking for people who might be able to share their experiences. After the initial surprise of seeing a foreigner with a clipboard in their local park, most people were very open and willing to chat through some of the questions I had as we completed the questionnaires. While I was able to communicate directly with participants who understood Mandarin, speaking to ethnic minorities to whom Mandarin isn't a native language required various levels of assistance from my research assistant.



Clockwise from top, Minaret in Urumqi, having fun riding a horse near Kanas Lake, Street scene in Urumqi

After small revisions and a shortening of the questionnaire, we chose a district to the south of the city and attempted to complete it with every tenth business. From the feedback of respondents, it was evident that economic growth is bringing opportunities for employment in the private sector across a number of particularly service industries but that these opportunities were not accessed or available in the same ways to different ethnic groups. The use of social networks, language skills and personal and religious preferences were all found to contribute to the differential access to work and maintain the 'ethnicised' nature of much of the labour market.

Overall, the research experience was a varied and at times challenging experience requiring me to navigate different environments and cultural expectations. At the same time, it was a unique opportunity to explore a new region and meet people from a variety of cultural backgrounds and learn more about my own skills as a researcher.

Simon is a current PhD student at the department of Geography, Royal Holloway.